

# Principles of Arrangement

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## Introduction

This Staff Information Paper deals with the principles of arrangement of records followed in the National Archives. It will discuss those principles as they apply to the arrangement of record groups, subgroups, series, and individual items.

## Basic Principle of Arrangement

The basic principle of arrangement is that of *respect des fonds*, sometimes spoken of as the principle of provenance. The meaning of this principle has been explained by Dr. Waldo G. Leland in the *Report of the [Illinois] State Education Building Commission to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly (1913)*, page 50, as follows:

Each public office is an administrative unit, and its records form a homogeneous group reflecting its activities. This large group naturally falls into subgroups, and the subgroups into series following the organization and functions of the office. The principle that must be borne in mind then, is that the archives must be so classified that the organization and functions that have produced them shall be clearly reflected by them. This is the substance of the famous principle of the *respect des fonds*.

The principle of *respect des fonds*, on the development of which additional information can be found in Staff Information Circular No. 5, was formulated by French archivists in the period following the French Revolution. It provided a rational basis for archival arrangement, substituting a system of preserving records by organic units or *fonds* for the old practice of arranging records by subject groups that were artificially established by the archivist. The system implicit in the principle is that every document will be traced to its origin and will be maintained as part of a group having the same origin. This guiding principle, which was refined and modified to suit the needs of various European archival agencies, was given a theoretical justification by the Dutch archivists S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin in their *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York, 1940. 225 p.; an English translation from the 1920 edition) and by the English archivist Hilary Jenkinson in *A Manual of Archive Administration* (rev. ed., London, 1937. xvi, 256 p.).

The first postulate of the principle of *respect des fonds* is that records will be maintained in the organic units or *fonds* in which they were originally accumulated or, conversely, that they will not be regrouped by subjects or in accordance with any other scheme that may be devised. In France a *fonds* was regarded as all records of a particular institution, such as an administrative authority, a corporation, or a family. In England the term "archive group" was used instead of "*fonds*," and this term was defined by Hilary Jenkinson as an accumulation "resulting from the work of an administration which was an organic whole, complete in itself, capable of dealing independently, without any added or external authority, with every side of any business which could normally be presented to it." In the National Archives the term "record group" is used and has been defined as "a major archival unit established somewhat arbitrarily with due regard to the principle of provenance and to the desirability of making the unit of convenient size and character for the work of arrangement and description and for the publication of inventories." The "record group," as this definition makes clear, is not precisely the same as the "*fonds*." Although in practice a "record group" often will also be a "*fonds*," sometimes it will include several "*fonds*" or only part of one. The meaning of the term is clarified in Staff Information Circular No. 15.

The principle of maintaining records in the organic units in which they were accumulated has gained universal acceptance in the archival profession. The usages growing out of this principle, however, have varied considerably from country to country. These apply chiefly to the order in which records within a *fonds* are to be maintained. The French circular in

which the principle of *respect des fonds* was first enunciated directed that records within a *fonds* should be arranged by subject groups, and that items within such subject groups should be arranged chronologically, geographically, or alphabetically, as circumstances might dictate. In Prussia, where records were properly arranged by registry offices before they were released to archival agencies, the *Registraturprinzip* or principle of registry, was developed, which provided that the arrangement given records in registry offices should remain intact. The manual compiled by the Dutch archivists emphasized that the arrangement of records is determined by the organization of the office that produced them, that the original arrangement given the records should be maintained, and that the primary work of the archivist is to restore the original arrangement where it has been disturbed. The propositions developed by the Dutch archivists were accepted by archivists of other countries. Various rules for the arrangement of records within *fonds* were developed, providing in general that the order given records within an agency or a registry office should be preserved and indicating the methods that should be followed in restoring the original order where it had been disturbed or lost or in devising a new order.

The principle of provenance has gained acceptance in the archival profession for a variety of reasons. (1) The principle serves to protect the integrity of records in the sense that their origins and the processes by which they came into existence are reflected by their arrangement. Most Government records are accumulated in connection with official actions, and as the actions of Government are related to each other through function and administrative organization, so the records are most intelligible when they are kept together under the identity of the agency or the subdivision of an agency by which they were accumulated and in the general order given them by that agency. (2) The principle serves to make known the character and significance of records; for the subject-matter contained in individual documents can be fully understood only in context with related documents. If records are arbitrarily torn from their context and rearranged under a subjective or any other arbitrary system of arrangement, their real significance as documentary evidence may be obscured or lost. (3) The principle provides the archivist with a workable and economical guide in arranging, describing, and servicing records in his custody. Arbitrary systems of arrangement cannot be applied to records without infinitely complicating the task of the archivist, for the complexity and diversity of their subject-matter makes the application of such systems impracticable if not impossible.

## **ARRANGEMENT IN THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

### **Arrangement of Record Groups**

In the National Archives an initial determination on the arrangement to be given records is made at the time they are allocated to records branches. The allocation of records is made on the basis either of their relation to some broad subject-matter field (such as defense, industry, or natural resources) or of their technical character (such as cartographic or audio-visual). Subject-matter relationships, however, are defined at this stage mainly in terms of the functions of the agencies that created the records. Thus records created by the Department of Agriculture and by independent agencies concerned with agricultural activities are allocated to the Natural Resources Records Branch, and within this branch to the Agriculture Records Section.

A second determination of the arrangement of records is made when they are allocated to record groups. A record group consists, as a rule, of the documentation produced by an administrative unit at the bureau level of the Government. These units may vary in character and size, as is evident from Staff Information Circular No. 15. In their entirety, however, the record groups embrace all governmental agencies from which records have been accessioned by the National Archives, and their number will be increased as required to encompass accessions from other agencies.

Determinations on the placement of record groups in the stacks are made within the records branches of the National Archives. Various factors have made it difficult to arrange the record groups in a completely logical pattern. The most important of these is the character of the Federal Government, which produced the records. The multiplicity of Government agencies and the complexity and fluidity of their organization make impossible a completely logical arrangement of all record groups. Another important factor is the manner in which records were accessioned. In its initial years, the National Archives was concerned with bringing into its custody the large volume of records that had accumulated in the Federal Government since its establishment. This accumulation of records was released to the National Archives piecemeal, in innumerable small lots. The volume of records to be attributed to a particular record group, therefore, could not be anticipated; and advance calculations on the space required for each of the record groups could not be made with accuracy. The records to be attributed to a particular record group could not be identified until their origins had been analyzed. And the availability of stack space and equipment was often a factor in determining the placement of records.

It is important to have an ideal stack plan as a guide for all physical movements of records so that gradually increasing quantities of records can assume relatively fixed positions. If all record shifting is done with such a plan in view, the number of shifts and their magnitude will be minimized.

Basic to any plan, of course, is the establishment of some fixed points of orientation in each stack area. Because of the diversity of the shapes of the several stack areas and of the ways in which the equipment is laid out in them, no general rule can be prescribed for the establishment of these points. But, whatever the starting points may be, the order of the rows should be established along the wide aisles on which they abut, counting from left to right. The order within a row should again be from left to right by sections; and within each section from left to right and from top to bottom.

An ideal plan of arrangement can be accomplished only gradually over the years as the two variables for each record group -- the intake and the outgo -- approach stability, that is, when all records worth preservation up to a practicable and convenient terminal point have been accessioned and the maximum reduction in volume has been achieved by disposal, microfilming, or the removal of records to Federal Records Centers. This stability is reached first, naturally, with closed record groups. It will be speeded up or slowed down according to the availability of labor resources for moving records into and out of the building. The continued existence of unequipped areas in some branches is recognized as a complicating factor. With open record groups stability can be only relative and partial, and any plan of arrangement for them must leave some space at least for future small increments. In planning the arrangement of record groups, two guiding principles can be followed:

1. Record groups should be arranged in an organizational or a functional relation to each other. -- The object to be attained in the arrangement of Government records is to show by their placement in the stacks the organization and functions of the agencies that created them.

The organizational method of arranging record groups is ordinarily preferred when it is practicable. This plan of arrangement should be followed whenever record groups have been established for each of the several bureaus or offices constituting a large Government agency, such as an executive department. When this is the case, the groups should be arranged in conformity to the hierarchical structure of the larger agency. The record groups representing the secretary's and staff offices would be placed first, followed by record groups representing the bureaus or other offices arranged in some logical order. This plan of arrangement is illustrated by the placement of the records of the Department of Agriculture. These records are allocated to a number of record groups. The group established for the general records of the Department, consisting of the records of the Office of the Secretary and certain staff offices, was placed in first position, while the groups established for the records of bureaus were arranged by name alphabetically. Where record groups have been established for the field offices of an agency, they should be placed near the groups covering records of the headquarters offices.

Where the organizational method of arrangement is impracticable, or for some good reason less desirable, a functional method should be used. Under this method of arrangement the relative locations of the record groups will reflect the functional relations of the agencies or offices in which they accumulated. Record groups established for a succession of agencies or offices related by function should be arranged so as to show the development of the governmental organizations that performed the function. Normally such record groups should be placed in chronological sequence, the group of a predecessor agency or office preceding that of the successor agency or office. For example, Record Group 108, Records of the Headquarters of the Army, which has the terminal date 1903, would be followed by Record Group 165, Records of the War Department General Staff, which took over part of the duties of the Office of the Commanding General. In the case of record groups created by independent agencies, those that relate to common or similar functions should be placed near to each other, in alphabetical, chronological, or some other logical order. As an example of this type of arrangement, reference may be made to record groups that document the Government's activities in relation to mining and minerals. Among them are Record Group 89, Records of the Federal Fuel Distributor; Record Group 150, Records of the National Bituminous Coal Commission; Record Group 194, Records of the War Minerals Relief Commission; Record Group 222, Records of the Bituminous Coal Division; Record Group 223, Records of the Bituminous Coal Consumers' Counsel; and Record Group 57, Records of the Geological Survey. Certain of these record groups that correspond to administrative units of the Department of the Interior might be arranged according to the organizational positions of those units in the Department. But the departmental arrangement might be modified to allow the records of the National Bituminous Coal Commission, an independent agency, to be placed immediately before those of the Bituminous Coal Division of the Department, which succeeded to its functions. The groups that are not directly related to units of the Department might then be brought together in a colony of record groups near those that are identified in some way with the Department.

Considerations of accessibility may be taken into account in determining the arrangement of record groups in the stacks. The activity of a record group may be so great as to justify placing it out of its normal position in relation to other record groups in order to bring it closer to the branch search room. Similarly, the size of a record group may raise considerations that would make it desirable to modify a strictly organizational or functional pattern. But only in exceptional circumstances should consideration of activity and size be permitted to override the basic scheme of arrangement.

**2. Record groups should be maintained as integral units.** -- The logic that underlies the creation of record groups requires that the records in each record group should be kept together without intermingling with them the records of other groups. Deviations from this rule should be permitted only when parts of a record group require special equipment or are security classified, so that they cannot be kept with the group to which they belong.

## **Arrangement of Subgroups**

Once a plan has been chosen for the arrangement of record groups showing their relations to each other, the next step is to provide for the arrangement within each record group of its subgroups. Arrangement according to a scheme is more important at this level than at the level of the record group. As in the case of the arrangement of record groups, the subgroups should be placed, insofar as possible, in logical relation to each other -- according to hierarchy, chronology, function, geographical location, or subject. In the American Historical Review (volume 18, page 24, October 1912) Dr. Leland wrote that records should be so arranged that "they at once make clear the processes by which they have come into existence," for they "are the product and record of the performance of its functions by an organic body, and they should faithfully reflect the workings of that organism." To arrange records in this manner the archivist must have a thorough knowledge of the administrative history of the organism that produced them. He must know its origins, its functions, and its organizational and functional development, including changes, transfers, or terminations of its functions or organizational units. The basic preliminary to the arrangement of records, therefore, is a study of the organizational history of the record producing units, their administrative procedures, the functions for which they were organized, and the records which they produced. On the basis of this study, the archivist must determine which method of grouping records will best show their character, significance, and relationships. Various methods, which are discussed below, may be followed either singly or in combination.

**1. Subgroups may be arranged in an organizational relationship to each other.** Usually an agency for which a record group has been established is subdivided into a number of smaller organizational units, the records of which may be considered as subgroups. These subgroups may be arranged in accordance with either the administrative status of the organizational units or the order in which the units were created.

The arrangement of subgroups should normally reflect the hierarchical structure of the creating agency. This arrangement will be possible whenever the record group consists of a number of subgroups that are clearly distinguishable on the basis of their origins in particular organizational units. Subgroups will be distinguishable on this basis in the degree to which the organizational units that created them maintained their own filing systems. Usually "bureaus" of oldline executive departments have "divisions" or "sections," the functions of which are well defined and result in separable and identifiable bodies of records. In such cases the administrative status of the organizational units should determine the placement of the record subgroups; the subgroups created by the highest supervisory or central office should be placed first, and after them the subgroups representing subordinate line or operating offices should be arranged in descending order of authority. If the latter are coordinate in authority, as, for example, "divisions" within a "bureau," they should be arranged in alphabetical order or in the order of their establishment.

The hierarchical approach to arrangement is also possible with respect to a record group containing both central and field office records. The subgroups representing the central office should be placed first, and after them the subgroups representing the field offices. The field office subgroups, however, may be arranged in any one of several ways. Those of numbered regional offices, for example, may be arranged numerically. This arrangement has been followed in arranging the regional records of the Soil Conservation Service. The subgroups of named units may be arranged alphabetically. Thus, in the record group of the United States Army commands, the subgroups of the camps, posts, and stations of the continental United States and Alaska have been placed in one alphabetical sequence. Or, the subgroups may be arranged geographically, as is the case in the record group of the naval districts and shore establishments, in which the numbered naval districts have a geographical basis. The geographical and numerical arrangements are sometimes combined, as in the case of the minute books of Selective Service local and appeal boards, which are arranged alphabetically by State and thereunder numerically by draft board. Records of the navy yards may be arranged geographically, as the yards are

frequently listed in the order of their location from north to south along the Atlantic Coast beginning with Portsmouth and ending with Key West.

Central files units, wherever they appear in the organization of an agency, constitute an exception to the rules for the arrangement of subgroups along hierarchical lines. Such units are regarded as record keeping rather than record-creating units. Of the records kept by them, those that are general to the bureau or other administrative organization served by them or that are in an organized file maintained for the organization as a whole should be placed before all other records of the organization; those that are clearly identifiable IS records of other single administrative units and not incorporated in a systematic filing system should be reunited with the records of the units to which they belonged.

The arrangement of subgroups may reflect the historical development of the creating agency. A strictly hierarchical arrangement of subgroups will not be possible when the units that created them passed through successive organizational changes. The chronological sequence of the creation of the organizational units, other than their administrative status, will in such cases determine the placement of the subgroups. If indistinguishable bodies of records were created by each of the successive organizational units, they should be arranged in order of time. Thus the subgroups of a predecessor unit should be placed before those of its successor.

2. Subgroups may be arranged in a functional relationship to each other. -- Frequently agencies for which record groups have been established have passed through so many organizational changes that the records accumulated by many superseded or discontinued units within them have lost their administrative identity. The functions of the agencies may have remained unchanged though the units that performed them may have been altered or abolished; and the records pertinent to the functions may span many such units without any clear breaks to distinguish those that were produced by the successive units. In such cases, the subgroups will naturally be arranged according to function. This may be done in any one of several ways. The subgroups may lend themselves to a chronological arrangement that will reflect the growth of functions; or they may lend themselves to an arrangement that will reflect the order in which the different functions were performed; or they may lend themselves to an arrangement that will place general subgroups relating to more than one function before those relating to single functions.

3. Subgroups may be arranged according to the types of records involved. -- Occasionally the natural subgroups of records within a record group do not correspond either to organizational units or to functions but correspond rather to types of records that cut across both functional and organizational lines. In such cases it is the physical characteristics of the records that distinguish the subgroups and largely determine their arrangement. The arrangement may reflect the chronological development of the records, as in the Office of the Secretary of War, from the "book period" through the "record card period" to the "modern period." Or it may have regard to the content of different record types, placing the types whose contents are general, such as correspondence, before the types of specific content, such as contracts.

## **Arrangement by Series**

Within the subgroups, series should be arranged according to some logical pattern that reflects the interrelationships among series and where appropriate the relationships of series to organization, functions, chronological periods, places, or subjects. The ultimate physical arrangement of series on shelves should be anticipated as far as possible when records are initially stored, and this arrangement should be carried out so that when a well-organized inventory has been prepared it will correspond to the physical arrangement of the records. (See Staff Information Circular 14, p. 3 f.)

Where the subgroups of records have been established on the basis of their organizational origins, the series within the subgroups should be arranged in relation to the functions performed by the administrative units that created them. And where several series relate to the same function, those of a general character, relating to more than one activity under the function, should be placed before those that are specific and relate to single activities. Or the sequence of the series may reflect the order in which the functions were performed, as, for example, beginning with "applications" and ending with "discharges." Or it may reflect the chronological growth of records around a given function, as when the first series represents the earliest record accumulation and later series represent subsequent accumulations.

Where the subgroups of records have been established on the basis of their functional origins, the series within them should be arranged so far as possible in relation to the organizational units of the agency that performed the functions. The series created by staff offices should precede those produced by subordinate administrative subdivisions; the series of the larger subdivisions should precede those of the smaller; the series of headquarters offices should precede those of field

offices; and the series of antecedent offices should precede those of the offices that took over their functions. If the records of the organizational units have not been separately maintained, the series may be arranged in relation to the various activities carried on under the function represented by the subgroup. The series may thus be arranged in the chronological order in which such activities were instituted, in the order in which they were performed, or in an order that would place series dealing with the function as a whole before series dealing with particular activities carried on under it.

Where the subgroups of records have been established on the basis of their types, the series should normally be arranged on the basis of their administrative origin, or their subject content. Series produced by particular organizational units should be arranged in hierarchical order; series that are distinguishable only by reference to their subject content may be arranged either chronologically or in such a way that those of a general and summary nature will precede those of a specific and detailed nature.

Normally in arranging series of indexes the following rules should be observed: An index should precede the series to which it relates. It should precede a group of series if it relates to more than one series. If it relates to a number of series that are not together, it should be placed before the largest or most used series that is indexed. Exceptions to these rules are permissible where indexes cannot be filed in narrow equipment or narrow aisles, and where for convenience and efficiency they need to be filed in the central aisles and near the service desks.

Series and isolated pieces of uncertain provenance should be placed at the end of the record group until their proper attribution can be determined.

## **Arrangement of File Units**

The final, and most detailed, step in arranging records is concerned with single documents, folders, dossiers, volumes, or other file units. File units, it was noted in Staff Information Paper No. 17, usually consist of records kept together because they relate to the same subject or transaction, or because they have the same form. These units, which vary in size and character, are usually placed in a sequential arrangement that is determined by the type of filing system employed. In a subject system -- whether it is arranged on an alphabetical, a subject-numeric, a classified, or some other basis -- records will ordinarily be filed together under subject captions, each of which may cover a folder or several folders, which, in turn, may contain a number of separate documents. In a case file system -- whether it is arranged alphabetically, numerically, or in some other way -- records will be assembled in case folders or dossiers. Where records are kept together because of similarity of form, the units of form will often be considered as the file units. This is the case with respect to bound volumes.

If, then, a series was established on the basis of the arrangement given the records -- in the sense that all file units arranged under a particular system are regarded as one series -- the problem of the archivist is fairly easy. He should simply maintain the series in the order imposed upon it by the originating office. The serial order given the records, whether alphabetical, numerical, or chronological, should be preserved.

A problem of rearrangement arises when this order has been disturbed or lost, or when, in exceptional circumstances, it is unintelligible. In such instances the archivist should attempt to restore the order given the records by the agency while they were in current use. In a subject system, for example, the aggregation of folders or dossiers kept together under subject captions should be placed in alphabetical order, if an alphabetical-subject system was employed, or in the order of the classification numbers, if a system of classification was employed. Within the folders the individual documents should be placed in proper sequence. In modern file folders it is customary to file such documents in reverse chronological order, the last item being placed first, while in many older folders the opposite order is employed. The order followed by the creating agency should be observed by the archivist. In restoring the arrangement of files reference should be made to the filing schemes, if such exist, or to indexes, subject captions, folder labels, file notations, and the like.

If a series was established on the basis of the form of the records -- in the sense that all records of a given form are regarded as one series -- the problem of the archivist, again, is fairly easy. A series consisting of records having the same form, however, may become unarranged more easily than one organized under a particular filing system. This is especially true with respect to bound volumes. Normally bound volumes should be placed on the shelves in chronological order or, if numbered, in numerical sequence.

If the arrangement given records by the originating office is unintelligible or one that makes reference servicing difficult, the archivist may devise a system of his own. Such new systems must protect the integrity of the records by reflecting their

functional or administrative origins and must be designed to facilitate the uses that can be anticipated for the records. An example of such rearrangement is found in the order given the climatological reports that were received from the Surgeon General's Office, the Smithsonian Institution, the Signal Office, and the Weather Bureau. Under the original arrangement of these reports, it was impossible to ascertain what climatological data existed for a given place. Under the rearrangement plan, the series created by each of the agencies were kept intact, but the volumes containing the reports were unbound and the individual reports within them were arranged by places (States and localities) and thereunder in chronological sequence. Another example is found in the work on the records of the United States Senate and House of Representatives. In this case a classification scheme was devised in which a "key" or "code" symbol was assigned to each kind of records. The symbol combines chronology and type of record. Sessions naturally follow in chronological pattern; hence 1A stands for the First Congress and 15A for the Fifteenth Congress and so on. The rough copy of a journal was assigned symbol A1, no matter in which Congress it originated. This symbol was combined with that used to designate the Congress, thus 1A-A1, 2A-A1, or 15A-A1. Similar symbols were used to designate other types of records and when combined with those of the different Congresses serve to indicate the place of each type of record in the over-all scheme of arrangement.

If records are received from an agency in complete disarray, with no perceptible order, the archivist again may devise a system of his own. Series of miscellany, in particular, should be arranged in whatever order is best suited to make known their character and significance. The individual items within such series may be grouped by subject, activity, type, place, or time, depending upon the nature of the records. In developing a system of arrangement the maxim that "simplicity is the shortest road to accessibility" should be followed.

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